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SUBJECT: AFGHAN MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS: NOT SPEAKING  
UP FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Civil society actors largely agree the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) is a weak advocate for Afghan women. The Ministry receives one of the smallest budgets of all Afghan ministries, and four women have rotated through as Minister over the past seven years. MOWA leadership envisions the Ministry as a policy-making body and relies with little success on other ministries to implement its programs. Some argue the Afghan government should not have a MOWA, as MOWA's existence gives other government entities an excuse to neglect issues affecting women. The story is not all negative, however, as some functions performed in Kabul and by MOWA's Department of Women's Affairs (DOWA) offices in the provinces benefit thousands of extremely needy women who arrive on MOWA's and DOWAs' doorsteps with nowhere else to turn.

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MOWA Basics  
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¶2. (SBU) Although a women's commission of sorts has existed in Afghanistan since 1922, the organization first achieved ministry status following the December 2001 Bonn Agreement. Since then four women have served as Minister of Women's Affairs, Dr. Sima Samar (Chairperson, Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission), Dr. Habiba Surobi (Governor of Bamyan), Dr. Massouda Jalal (Director and Founder, Jalal Foundation), and Dr. H. B. Ghazanfar (current). Dr. Ghazanfar, an Uzbek originally from Balkh Province, earned her doctorate in Philosophy at St. Petersburg University. Prior to her August 2006 appointment as Minister of Women's Affairs, she served as Dean of Language and Literature at Kabul University. MOWA employs 183 staff in Kabul (112 women, 71 men) and 311 staff (196 women and 115 men) in DOWA offices in all 34 provinces. In 2008 MOWA received 0.2% of GoIRA's operating budget. USAID supports MOWA financially and logistically including through The Asia Foundation whose programs include capacity building and leadership training for MOWA senior management.

¶3. (SBU) MOWA's largest accomplishment is the drafting and promulgation of the 10 year National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), a policy document which

outlines how the Afghan government will implement its commitments to women made in the Afghan Constitution and in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. The areas of government responsibility include security; legal protection and human rights; leadership and political participation; economy, work, and poverty; health; and education. The document is an important step toward identifying challenges Afghan women face and assigning responsibility to address these challenges. However, the move from policy to implementation is stalling largely due to MOWA's inability to advocate counterparts in other ministries more forcefully or successfully.

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Questioning MOWA's Existence  
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¶4. (SBU) Civil society and government actors describe MOWA as ineffective in advancing women's rights and quality of life. More sympathetic observers attribute MOWA's failures to lack of cooperation from other Afghan government entities. MOWA leadership views its role as a policy-maker and depends on other ministries to implement its policies. Minister Ghazanfar admits she feels uncomfortable speaking out as the only woman present during cabinet meetings and thus, does not aggressively lobby her counterparts to do their share under the NAPWA and other women's rights initiatives. Not only do many ministries do nothing to support the MOWA agenda, some have blocked MOWA actions. For example, last year MOWA abandoned a public information campaign against domestic violence under pressure from the Ulema Council and the

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Supreme Court, MOWA Deputy Minister Mojgan Mostafavi said. Mostafavi, exemplifying MOWA's passive attitude towards advocacy, said "perhaps" MOWA would re-attempt the campaign "in another ten years."

¶5. (SBU) Some civil society actors argue MOWA should not exist. Global Rights Country Director and Afghan Women's Network (comprised of 67 women-led NGOs) leader Wazhma Frogh opposed establishing MOWA in 2001 and still thinks the ministry is counter-productive. Frogh (an Afghan American) contends that MOWA's existence gives other ministries and government entities an excuse to do nothing to help women. Meanwhile MOWA receives one of the smallest budgets of any Afghan ministry, showing a lack of government-wide commitment to supporting the Ministry. Furthermore MOWA is always led by a Uzbek or Hazara, which in a country dominated by Pashtuns and secondarily by Tajiks, diminishes the Ministry's clout. She argues the Palace checks the box of minority representation for the Uzbeks or the Hazaras with the Minister of Women's Affairs position. Frogh and those who share her view argue all ministries should take responsibility for advancing women's issues and should be held accountable for lack of progress.

¶6. (SBU) Afghan Women Council Director Fatana Gailani also thinks MOWA should be eliminated in favor of a women's affairs office within each ministry. When we talk about democracy and gender, she said, we should not separate men and women, who have equal rights and should be treated equally. The government must work to empower women economically, politically, socially, and culturally by providing a wide range of programs and services such as protection from violence, adult literacy classes, parenting classes, health education, legal rights awareness, and skills and capacity building. These areas pertain to many different ministries, and thus, all ministries should have an office or section devoted to implementing these programs and ensuring women make equal progress with men in these areas. She criticized Karzai for selecting an unprepared Minister (Ghazanfar) and characterized the ministry as having "no achievements."

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¶7. (SBU) Others disagree, including 2004 presidential candidate and ex-MOWA Minister Massouda Jalal. Jalal, who currently heads a women's capacity building and literacy training foundation, favors any institution dedicated to women. She attributed MOWA's weakness to current Minister Ghazanfar. Jalal views Ghazanfar as ill-prepared for the job and unable to lobby her counterparts or empower her subordinates. When Jalal was Minister she had a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Transportation (MoT) and would meet him each month to ensure MoT was fulfilling its obligations to implement MOWA's transportation-related policies. She suggests each Ministry have a dedicated contact person for liaison with MOWA and the Minister hold other ministers accountable at cabinet meetings and through pressure in Parliament to fulfill commitments made to MOWA.

¶8. (SBU) Afghan businesswoman Hassina Syed agreed MOWA should be maintained, but sharply criticized the Ministry's lack of leadership and activism on women's issues. MOWA's existence forces Afghan men to incorporate women into government. Recognition that women have a role to play is an important first step. Unfortunately, MOWA staff spend most of their time "chatting about their jewelry, their daughters getting married to their friends' sons, sipping tea, and eating rice." MOWA should have made the loudest protests when the Taliban threw acid on the Kandahar schoolgirls, and when President Karzai pardoned a convicted rapist. Syed believes it is not feasible for all ministries to have a section devoted to women's issues - there is a clear lack of government-wide support for advancing women's rights. Also, many families who allow female relatives to work at MOWA would not allow them to work in a male-dominated office at

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another ministry.

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What is working well  
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¶9. (SBU) Notwithstanding all of the problems outlined above, MOWA is doing some important and effective work on behalf of Afghan women. In Kabul, MOWA's legal department carries a heavy caseload counseling distraught victims of family violence and providing legal advice and representation to needy women. Legal department Director Fawzia Hamini is knowledgeable, professional, and works tirelessly counseling the dozens of walk-in clients the department assists each week. Hamini spearheaded MOWA's drafting of a domestic violence bill and is working with the Ministry of Justice to produce a final version in anticipation of the March 8 commemoration of International Women's Day.

¶10. (SBU) DOWA offices in the provinces often are the only hope for women escaping cases of extreme violence and cruelty. Despite inadequate funding and shortages of service providers, DOWAs in many parts of the country carry out their mandates to the best they can. The Herat DOWA office provides legal and family counseling and refers women to shelters. The Kunduz DOWA office hosts community roundtables on women's issues, counsels families, and provides space for human rights training for judicial officials. These functions, of course, could be performed by NGOs or other civil society groups, which run Afghanistan's 19 women's shelters. However, like MOWA, these groups, where they exist, often lack funding and organizational capacity. Afghan NGOs also frequently suspend operations indefinitely or close up shop all together when a grant runs out or the director moves to a higher-paying job elsewhere.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT. The first three MOWA Ministers are all outspoken progressive leaders. Minister Ghazanfar is much different -- conservative, quiet, and probably in over her

head. MOWA's lack of success under the first three ministers, however, means the choice of minister may not float or sink the ship. The debate over MOWA's existence is one for Afghans to lead and resolve. In the meantime, MOWA is doing important things for women, particularly in the provinces. AID is providing much needed capacity training and financial support, both elements MOWA needs more of, particularly directed to the provincial offices. We will give MOWA support as it works within the government to advance its initiatives and presses other agencies to increase the number of women in government positions.

WOOD